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## ABSTRACT

This study surveyed the nature and extent of exploratory programming in intermediate schools. A 22-item questionnaire was sent to all 285 of the state's middle and junior high schools. Of the 163 respondents, 160 indicated that they had some form of exploratory programming. The latter number included: (1) 155 schools with traditional exploratory courses in art, music, foreign languages, and industrial arts; (2) 3 schools with elective mini-courses that exposed students to a wide variety of topics, such as backpacking, first-aid, and knitting; (3) 1 school with exploratory activities integrated into the curriculum; and (4) 3 schools with other types of exploratory programming. The reasons given for establishing exploratory programming included state mandates, middle level education literature, and principal decisions. The majority of schools served allocated between 41 and 60 minutes of exploratory learning per day. It was also found that the majority of exploratory classes were taught by teachers hired specifically for exploratory instruction and lasted from 3 to 9 weeks. Most exploratory teachers were not able to select which classes they taught, nor were the majority of students able to select which exploratory classes they took. (MDM)

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## Exploratory Programming in Georgia's Middle Schools

Louis L. Warren & Michael G. Allen

### Introduction

Exploration is ingrained in the human spirit. Since time immemorial, people have expanded their knowledge and understanding of the world through exploration. The history of most nations in the Western Hemisphere began with exploration. In our own nation explorers "opened the West", though it contained a wealth of unique native cultures and its own rich cultural history.

Today exploration continues in such environments as space, deep within the world's oceans and seas, in the field of genetics, electronics and medicine. Humankind continues to plumb the depths of its lack of knowledge and understanding of the world. The spirit of exploration even at the end of the 20th century, is alive and well. Young and old alike push back the veil of ignorance, misunderstanding, and superstition. Though this spirit of exploration seems to be an inherent part of being human, it is subject to training and refinement as a skill employed in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

As a task subject to development and refinement, schools may play an important role in cultivating an attitude of exploration. The manner in which schools are organized, curriculum structured and teachers trained to interface with students can impact directly on student attitudes about exploration. As early as the 1940's justifications for the junior high school model of early adolescent education identified exploration as one of the essential functions of these schools (Gruhn & Douglas, 1971).

Initial efforts to promote exploration centered on such activities as "short term courses and electives." Also, such offering were often "sexist" in the sense that young women studied home economics while young men studies industrial arts and neither sex was allowed to take the other subject. Exploration as a component of the middle grades school movement has evolved to the point where educators hold a much broader perspective on the concept that was originally the case.

Historical overviews of the development of exploration in the middle school movement may be found in a number of publications including Bergman (1992), and, Compton and Hawn (1993). Others have sought, through professional writing, to influence our collective understanding of exploration including Beane (1990), Erb and Doda (1989), Lounsbury (1992) and Vars (1987, 1993).

### Exploration: Differing Perspectives

Given the nature of early adolescence an attitude of exploration is usually present among a greater majority of these youth. Current developments in interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum are one response to this interest. The most recent perspective on exploration is that it should be intimately tied to both interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum as well as pervade the entire middle school program. This is one of three models of exploratory programming and how it ought to be organized. Briefly, the earliest perspective was on traditional exploratory courses (e.g. art, music, home economics, industrial arts). More recently, elective mini-courses, in addition to expanded traditional exploratory course offerings (e.g. computers) introduce students to a variety of topics, skills and content such as

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backpacking, first aid, knitting, and taxidermy. The current perspective on exploratory curriculum integrates such activities into the total curriculum through student exploration in areas of interest within the core curriculum as well as traditional exploratory courses and elective mini-courses.

In short, our understanding of exploration as an important intellectual endeavor now fits the reality young and old alike experience daily. Exploration of one's world is a natural and all-encompassing intellectual activity. It is not a segmented and compartmentalized process. Rather, it pervades life itself. As such, middle grades school that incorporate the concept of exploration into every aspect of their program are in touch with one of the essential needs of early adolescents.

### A State Perspective

As our understanding of exploration expands it is important to ascertain the degree to which such a broadened perspective is embraced by middle grades schools. In an effort to do so the authors recently surveyed Georgia's middle/junior high schools to determine the extent and type of exploratory offerings in these schools. Further, we sought to determine the nature of these offerings in light of the current understanding of exploration in middle grades education. A survey questionnaire designed to elicit information enabled us to build a clearer picture of the various models of exploration extant in middle schools. The remainder of this article describes what we discovered. We found a fascinating and divergent range of perspectives on exploration.

### The Sample

A 22 item questionnaire was mailed to all middle/junior high schools in Georgia as identified, by title (middle school, junior high school, intermediate school), in the *Georgia Public Education Directory* (1993). The sample size was 285. The return numbered 163 or 57%. The data from each completed questionnaire were collated and are reported in various categories.

### The Results

One hundred sixty of the respondents said they have some sort of exploratory program in place while three indicated they had no such program. The grade configuration of the schools reporting an exploratory program are identified in Table One. The majority of schools reporting contain grades 6-8.

**TABLE 1**  
**MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOLS BY GRADE CONFIGURATION +**

Grade	5-7	5-8	6-8	7-8
Total	3	3	135	16

Seven schools reporting have other configurations 4-7, 4-8, 6-7, 8-9.  
This represents the total number of respondents. The number represents a 57% (163/285) return.

In an effort to assess the nature of each exploratory program the authors identified three types of exploratory programming: (1) Traditional Exploratory courses (e.g. art, music, home living, industrial arts—now technology education—computers and foreign language); (2) Elective Mini-Courses (introduces students to a variety of topics, skills and content fields such as backpacking, first aid, knitting and taxidermy); (3) Exploratory Activities integrated into the total curriculum (students are permitted to explore in areas of interest within core content classes (e.g. ethnicity, civil liberties, censorship to name a few). A fourth category—Other—was also included as a sort of “catch-all” for any exploratory type activities which did not fit into the first three. Table Two identifies the number and type of exploratory programming in the respondent schools with the traditional exploratory course offerings clearly the most predominant.

**TABLE 2**  
**NUMBER AND TYPE OF EXPLORATORY PROGRAMS**

Description+	1	2	3	4
Total	155	3	1	3

- + 1. Traditional Exploratory Courses (e.g. art, music, home living, industrial arts, computers, foreign language).
- 2. Elective Mini-Courses (introduces students to a variety of topics, skills, and content fields such as backpacking, first aid, knitting, taxidermy).
- 3. Exploratory activities integrated into the total curriculum (students are permitted to explore in areas of interest within core content classes such as ethnicity, civil liberties, censorship within social studies).
- 4. Other (e.g. mini-courses, but not elective time).

The number of years exploratory programming in the respondent schools varies from 0-2 years to more than 12. The majority of schools reporting indicate that such programming has been a part of the school curriculum for 3-8 years. These data are reported in Table Three.

**TABLE 3**  
**NUMBER OF YEARS OF EXPLORATORY PROGRAMMING**

Number of Years	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	More than 12
Total	18	48	46	19	30

The most influential factor for including an exploratory program in the school curriculum are reported in Table Four. The most predominant reasons include state mandate, middle level education literature and the principal of the school. The majority of schools reported multiple responses to this question indicating that more than one constituency influenced the decision to include such activities in the overall school program.

**TABLE 4**

## FACTORS INFLUENCING EXPLORATORY PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Total	69	18	16	18	11	4	52	23

- +1. State Mandate
- +2. Board of Education
- +3. Superintendent & Central Office
- +4. Faculty
- +5. Students
- +6. Parents
- +7. Middle Level Education Literature
- +8. Principal

\*Multiple Responses

An important factor influencing success in exploratory curriculum is the degree to which faculty receive adequate staff development training as well as witness actual exploratory programming in day-to-day operation. In 129 of the schools reporting, faculty experienced exploratory programs in other schools first hand. Additionally, 131 of the schools reported that faculty had attended workshops, presentations or conferences which dealt with exploratory programs.

Factors influencing the exploratory programs and ranked in order of importance, included such restraints as availability of facilities and equipment, as well as interest of students, faculty and the Principal.

Staff involvement in exploratory programming is another factor critical to success. Only 12 schools reported that all staff were actively involved in the exploratory curriculum while 148 stated that not all staff were involved. The majority of the reporting schools indicated that they had specific teachers hired to teach the exploratory classes. In 156 schools, exploratory was a required component of each student's school program. Interestingly, 64 schools indicated that staff enjoyed the option to select which exploratory course they wished to teach while 92 said teachers did not have such an option. On the other hand 55 schools allowed students to select which exploratory course experiences they participated in while in 101 schools disallowed students this option.

Exploratory classes tend to have rather large enrollments as indicated by the data. In fact, in 151 of the schools class size ranges from 16 to 30 students. Five schools reported that enrollment exceeds 30 students in some exploratory courses. These data contained in Table Five.

**TABLE 5**

## FACTORS INFLUENCING EXPLORATORY PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Number of Students	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	More than 30
Total	1	1	7	34	60	52	5

In light of the movement toward integrating the concept of exploration into the entire curricular offerings of the middle grades school it is interesting that 160 of the schools reported that exploratory programing occurs throughout the entire school day, five days per week. The number of weeks per year in which such programing is offered ranges from three to more than eighteen. These data are contained in Table Six

**TABLE 6**  
**EXPLORATORY PROGRAM SCHEDULING**  
**WEEKS PER YEAR**

<b>Number of Weeks</b>	<b>0-2</b>	<b>3-6</b>	<b>7-9</b>	<b>10-18</b>	<b>More than 18</b>
Total	0	64	40	16	55

Table Seven reports the number of minutes per day during which exploratory programing is scheduled. The range is from approximately 20 minutes per session to more than ninety minutes in a few instances. Forty to sixty minutes per session appears to be the norm however.

**TABLE 7**  
**EXPLORATORY PROGRAM SCHEDULING**  
**MINUTES PER DAY**

<b>Number of Minutes</b>	<b>1-20</b>	<b>21-40</b>	<b>41-60</b>	<b>61-90</b>	<b>More than 90 Minutes</b>
Total	1	6	112	13	28

An important component of any exploratory experience is the opportunity to extend such learning beyond the immediate classroom and/or the regularly scheduled exploratory time. In fifty-four schools, teachers and students enjoy the option to do this, while in 106 they do not have the opportunity to extend exploratory program activities beyond the regularly scheduled classroom time.

Another important aspect of exploratory programing is evaluating the experience. Table Eight reports the number and type of evaluation used in schools included in the survey. An emphasis on "numerical average" predominates.

**TABLE 8**  
**EVALUATING STUDENT PERFORMANCE**  
**IN EXPLORATORY PROGRAMS**

Description	Numerical Average*	Letter Grade*	Satisfactory/ Unsatisfactory*	Complete/ Incomplete*
Total	129	37	11	0

\*Multiple Responses

In view of the literature supporting such programming, we are happy to report, that 141 of the schools included, indicated that exploratory programming is a primary function of the middle school. Even though most of these schools contain "traditional exploratory course based programs" there is a clear commitment to the concept of exploration and its relationship to early adolescence. And, as one might expect, the attitude of those involved in exploratory programming (e.g. students, staff, parents and the general public) is overwhelmingly favorable. Table Nine reports these data for each of the constituencies involved in such programming.

**TABLE 9**  
**ATTITUDES ABOUT EXPLORATORY PROGRAMMING**

GROUP	ESTIMATE OF GROUP'S ATTITUDE		
	Favorable	Indifferent	Opposed
Students	146	14	0
Staff	148	10	2
Parents	122	38	0
Public	113	47	0

Major problems challenging the development and implementation of exploratory programs include scheduling, lack of variety of course offerings, personnel, and facilities, student apathy, lack of sufficient funding, meeting state mandate and, finally, lack of faculty support. In spite of these constraints, better than half of Georgia's middle grades schools, make a concerted effort to provide some exploratory curriculum to students.

### Conclusions

The "exploratory program picture" painted by the data reveal a rather variegated exploratory landscape. Clearly, there exists in the state wide distinctions in what constitutes good exploratory curriculum. Among the conclusions one may draw from the data, it is clear that Georgia's middle grades schools continue to offer, with the greatest frequency, traditional exploratory programs. These exploratory programs, with large number of students (20-30) and an average length of 50 minutes daily, are typically taught throughout the day. The majority of exploratory classes are taught by specifically hired exploratory teachers and last from three to nine

weeks. Most exploratory teachers are not able to select which classes they will teach nor are the majority of students able to select which exploratory class they will take. It appears that state mandates supported by middle grades educational literature has the greatest influence in regard to including an exploratory program within the reporting middle grades schools. However, an overwhelming majority of the reporting middle grades faculties have made the effort to improve their school's exploratory program by attending workshops, presentations, and visiting other schools with successful exploratory programs.

It appears, based on the data gathered for this study, that middle grades schools in Georgia define and recognize exploratory classes when they can be classified as separate classes (e.g., band, art, foreign language). These separate exploratory classes are often viewed as requiring special facilities, specialized teachers for subject matter knowledge, and special grouping to facilitate the experience. However, while it is important to continue to offer these separate exploratory classes, middle grades schools need to continue to place more emphasis on integrating exploration within the core curriculum. Teachers should tap into young adolescents' natural curiosity to explore within the curriculum. For example topics such as music, art and foreign language could be studied and explored within content courses such as social studies. If students show a special interest in jazz while studying the "Roaring Twenties", then the students should be encouraged to explore and study the topic in greater detail.

As stated earlier, exploration is ingrained in the human spirit and should be encouraged within the middle grades schools. According to this study, the middle grades schools in Georgia continue to implement and improve an exploratory program which is important to the success of a middle school. The information gathered in this study will provide a base to compare future studies on exploratory programs in middle grades schools.

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